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ABSTRACT

Objective self-awareness theory and stimulus incongruity theory suggest that focusing one's attention on one's behavior in an unfamiliar situation will increase the drive to evaluate oneself, which may be manifested in social comparison. Videotapes of male undergraduates conversing with hand-held puppets were used to study direction of attention (self-focused vs. other-focused). Characteristics of a comparison other (similar vs. dissimilar) were manipulated by showing subjects videotapes of themselves and others and having subjects code their reactions. Measures of arousal and attributional tendency indicated that the manipulation of attention was successful. Significantly more subjects in the self-focused-similar conditions, as opposed to those in the other conditions, chose to observe the comparison other. (Author/BEF)

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ATTENTIONAL ANTECEDENTS OF SOCIAL COMPARISON PROCESSES

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ABSTRACT

Objective self awareness theory and stimulus incongruity theory suggest that focusing one's attention on one's behavior in an unfamiliar situation will increase the drive to evaluate oneself, which may be manifested in social comparison. In the present experiment direction of attention (Self-Focused vs. Other-Focused) and characteristics of a comparison other (Similar vs. Dissimilar) were manipulated. Measures of arousal and attributional tendency indicated that the manipulation of attention was successful. Results on the main dependent measure indicated that significantly more subjects in the Self-Focused-Similar conditions chose to observe the comparison other than in the remaining three conditions.

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ATTENTIONAL ANTECEDENTS OF SOCIAL COMPARISON PROCESSES

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According to Festinger (1954), there is a drive to evaluate one's opinions and abilities. When objective bases for comparison are unavailable, evaluations will be based on comparison with others. In particular, a person given a range of comparison others will select someone similar in abilities or opinions as the basis for comparison.

Schachter (1959) proposed that the drive for self evaluation applies to emotions as well. He further suggested that the drive to evaluate the appropriateness of one's emotions should be greatest in situations that are both disturbing and unfamiliar or ambiguous. Since such situations do not afford an objective basis for evaluating emotions, a person should affiliate with others in order to compare his emotions with theirs. In fact, in a wide range of emotionally arousing circumstances, people prefer the company of others (Schachter, 1959). In addition, when people are actually given an opportunity to wait with others, social comparison processes appear to operate. Schachter and Singer (1962) reported that subjects experiencing unexplained arousal imitated the emotional behavior of a confederate. Subjects apparently inferred the emotion appropriate to the situation from the confederate's behavior. In short, in unfamiliar situations people appear to evaluate their emotions through comparison with the reactions of others. Thus, social comparison may be one function served by affiliation with similar others.

Schachter (1959) not only extended social comparison theory to include emotions, he also suggested that the magnitude of the drive for self evaluation may be determined by the level of uncertainty. Clearly, a person is more

likely to feel uncertain in unfamiliar than in familiar surroundings. Another variable which may affect one's uncertainty is the direction of one's attention.

Duval and Wicklund (1972) postulated two states of conscious attention. The attention of the subjectively self aware person is focused on the surroundings, away from self. In contrast, in the objectively self aware state, one's attention is focused on oneself and one's actions. A state of objective self awareness can be created with mirrors, cameras, or critical audiences. The two states of conscious attention affect performance on motor tasks and also the attributions one makes for one's behavior. For example, objectively self aware individuals assume more responsibility for their actions. To account for these effects, Duval and Wicklund suggested that focusing attention on one's actions makes salient relevant standards. As a result, conditions that create a state of objective self awareness may increase the drive to evaluate oneself.

Differences in the direction of attention also occur as a result of differences in perspectives, for example, whether one is an actor (the source of a particular behavior) or an observer watching the behavior. An actor's attention is usually focused on the surrounding situation. In contrast, for the observer, the actor's behavior usually is more salient than the surrounding situation. When asked whether a given behavior reflects personal characteristics or characteristics of the situation, actors make more situational attributions than observers (Jones & Nisbett, 1972). Jones and Nisbett suggested that the attributional biases result from the differences in the direction of attention. This explanation suggests that attributions should reverse if actors and observers exchange perspectives. Consistent with this prediction, Storms (1973) reported that the attributions of actors were

more dispositional than the attributions of observers when actors were shown videotapes of their behavior, which allowed them to see themselves from the perspective of observers. Clearly, the direction of attention influences causal attributions. The question remains whether this relationship is related to self evaluation.

If, as Jones and Nisbett suggest, we are unaccustomed to being the focus of our own attention, when our attention is focused on our behavior, the behavior may be more likely to appear unusual or incongruous to us than to an observer (Kiesler, 1974). The self-focused individual may feel uncertain about his actions and question their appropriateness. In short, conditions which direct attention to one's behavior may induce a drive to evaluate the behavior. While Duval and Wicklund suggest that self-focusing devices, such as cameras and mirrors, shift conscious awareness to a state in which standards are salient, Kiesler suggests that self-focused individuals become concerned with evaluating their behavior only to the extent that they are unaccustomed to viewing their own behavior. Furthermore, according to the Kiesler model, the self-focused individual is both aroused and motivated to reduce the incongruity of the behavior. Incongruity is reduced when the individual can explain or account for the behavior.

An assumption common to attribution theories is that in seeking to understand or explain an event, one seeks causal information. In the case of one's own behavior, a person attempts to determine whether the behavior reflects personal characteristics or is a response to the situation (cf. Kelley, 1967). When the behavior occurs in a novel or unusual situation, prior experience offers little help in answering the causal question. Logically, one could decide between the two attributions by observing one's own behavior in other situations or by observing the behavior of others in the same

situation. So long as one remains in the situation, the second alternative is more likely. Hence, the individual should be motivated to observe the behavior of another in the same situation to determine if his own behavior was situationally determined.

Thus, manipulations of the direction of an actor's attention may provide one method for varying the level of the self-evaluation drive. Furthermore, if the situation is unusual or novel, the drive to evaluate oneself should be manifested in selective social comparison. An individual should prefer to observe the behavior of another in the same situation over another in a different situation.

The present experiment was designed to assess the role of attention as an antecedent to social comparison. In the present design, direction of attention and characteristics of a comparison other were orthogonally manipulated. If subjects whose attention is focused on self become more self evaluative, then they should be more sensitive to the characteristics of the comparison other than subjects whose attention is focused on another. In particular, if offered a choice between observing their own and another's behavior, self-focused subjects should show greater preference for the other if the other's situation is the same as the subject's (Similar Other) than if the other's situation is different (Dissimilar Other). Subjects whose attention is focused on another (Other-Focused) should show no variation as a function of the characteristics of the other's situation. More specifically, analysis of the proportions selecting the videotape of the comparison other should reveal an interaction such that the proportion of people selecting the comparison other is greater in the Self-Focused-Similar Other condition than in the Self-Focused-Dissimilar Other condition. The proportions selecting the comparison other should not differ in the Other-Focused

conditions.

Method

As part of an alleged investigation of conversation structure, 99 male undergraduates were individually videotaped while conversing with a hand-held puppet. Direction of attention was manipulated by varying whether subjects practiced the "conversation coding" task while watching a 30-second videotape segment of their own conversations (Self-Focused conditions) or another's conversation with the puppet (Other-Focused conditions). Each subject was then offered either a choice between doing the "conversation coding" task while viewing the full five minutes of his own videotape or the videotape of another subject engaged in conversation with the puppet (Similar Other conditions) or a choice between doing the task while viewing his own videotape or the videotape of another subject engaged in conversation about tinker toy construction (Dissimilar Other conditions). The primary dependent measure was the proportion of subjects in each condition who chose to view the videotape of another subject rather than their own. No subject actually saw the videotape he selected.

Subjects completed two affect adjective checklists, the first following the filming (AACL #1), the second following the videotape segment (AACL #2). Following the choice of videotape, all subjects filled out a set of scales designed to assess causal attributions for the behavior of the person on the videotape segment they had viewed and ratings of the choice alternatives. Each subject was thoroughly debriefed and was asked for permission to use his videotape later in the study. All subjects consented.

Results

If focusing one's attention on oneself is arousing, subjects in the Self-Focused conditions should have experienced a greater increase in arousal after viewing the videotape segment than subjects in the Other-Focused conditions. Since the arousal measures were taken before the manipulation of the characteristics of the comparison other, a *t*-test was performed on arousal index scores (the number of negative adjectives checked on AACL #2 minus the number of negative adjectives checked on AACL #1). Self-Focused subjects reported a greater increase in negative affective arousal than Other-Focused subjects, t (87) = 2.11, $p < .05$.

In addition, manipulation of the direction of attention was expected to affect causal attributions for the behavior of the person on the videotape segment. Following Storms (1973), an index of attributional tendency was determined for each individual by subtracting the attribution to situational characteristics from the attribution to personal characteristics, summed across four traits. Analysis of the attributional tendency scores indicated a marginally significant main effect for the direction of attention, F (1, 95) = 2.80, $p < .10$. Self-Focused subjects made more dispositional attributions than Other-Focused subjects. This difference was most pronounced when subjects rated the nervousness of the person on the videotape segment. Self-Focused subjects attributed the person's nervousness to personal characteristics to a greater degree than Other-Focused subjects, F (1, 95) = 4.18, $p < .05$.

Following an arcsin transformation, a 2 X 2 analysis of variance was performed on the proportions of subjects selecting the videotape of the comparison other (the primary dependent measure), revealing a significant interaction, F (1,∞) = 4.19, $p < .05$, and a main effect for the direction of attention manipulation, F (1,∞) = 19.94, $p < .05$. More subjects chose to view the videotape of

the comparison other in the Self-Focused condition than in the Other-Focused conditions (Table 1). In addition, more Self-Focused subjects chose to view the videotape of the comparison other who was in the same situation (Similar Other) than chose the comparison other who was in a different situation (Dissimilar Other). In contrast, the proportion of Other-Focused subjects choosing the videotape of the comparison other was the same whether the other subject was described as being in the same situation or a different situation. Additional self-report measures indicated that the chosen videotape was consistently evaluated more favorably than the unchosen videotape (regardless of the specific videotape chosen), and neither the absolute nor the relative evaluations of the videotapes varied by condition.

Conclusions

The results for the arousal and attributional tendency indices indicate that showing a subject a segment of his own or another subject's videotape effectively determined whether his attention was focused toward or away from himself. Furthermore, the direction of attention influenced whether the subject's selection of a videotape was affected by the characteristics of the comparison other's videotape. Presumably, if a subject wanted to compare his behavior to another's, he would be more likely to select another's videotape if the other was in the same situation than if the other was in a different situation. A subject who was unconcerned about social comparison would be as likely to select the videotape of a similar other as the videotape of a dissimilar other. Thus, the obtained results suggest that the choices of Self-Focused subjects reflect social comparison processes to a greater degree than the choices of Other-Focused subjects.

The relationship between attention and social comparison processes obtained in the present experiment can be interpreted either within the framework of objective self awareness theory (Duval & Wicklund, 1972) or stimulus

incongruity theory (Kiesler, 1974). According to Duval and Wicklund, directing attention to one's own behavior creates a state of objective self awareness in which relevant evaluative standards become salient. From the perspective of stimulus incongruity theory, when attention is directed to one's own behavior, the behavior may appear incongruous, thereby increasing arousal and motivation to explain the behavior. From either perspective social comparison provides a means to evaluate one's own behavior. While the two theories make the same prediction for the present design, the proposed processes differ. In particular, stimulus incongruity theory suggests that the effect of focusing attention on one's own behavior depends on the incongruity of the behavior. Thus, a person who was accustomed to observing himself in a particular setting would not be motivated to evaluate the behavior. In contrast, objective self awareness theory would not predict that familiarity with observing one's own behavior would reduce the drive for self-evaluation. While the present experiment was not designed as a critical test of the two theories, the results obtained suggest that the differences in the proposed theoretical processes warrant further research.

Both social comparison processes (cf. Suls & Miller, 1977) and the relationship between attention and causal attributions (cf. McArthur & Post, 1977) have received considerable attention in the last few years. The present study demonstrates that social comparison processes may prove an interesting field in which to test theoretical attempts to integrate motivational and information-processing approaches.

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TABLE 1

The Effects of Direction of Attention (Self- vs. Other-Focused) and Similarity of Comparison Other (Similar vs. Dissimilar) on the Proportions of Subjects Choosing to View the Videotape of the Comparison Other

Direction of Attention	Similarity of Comparison Other	
	Similar	Dissimilar
Self-Focused	.96	.69
	(25)	(26)
Other-Focused	.38	.44
	(24)	(25)

Note. Cell n's are in parentheses. Proportions are based on the number of subjects in each condition who chose to view the videotape of the comparison other rather than their own videotape.